

United States Department of Agriculture
Extension Service
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EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF 4-H CLUBS

by

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The beginning of what is now known as 4-H Club work had its roots in a situation which developed largely in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Progressive educators in town and city schools were introducing nature study into the curriculum. School gardens were attracting attention in many places throughout the country. Cornell University was encouraging nature study as the basis of a better agricultural education. Rural educators, in response to the demand on the part of farm people, were introducing subjects into the course of study which would teach the boys and girls the appreciation of rural life and lay emphasis upon the opportunities in the country and thus serve to direct attention to an understanding of life in the country. In 1898, Professor Liberty Hyde Bailey, of Cornell University, inaugurated a system of junior naturalist leaflets for use in rural schools and assisted in the organization of nature study clubs. Since many of the rural teachers had not had much preparation for the teaching of agricultural subjects, the experiment stations of the various State agricultural colleges were called on to furnish information.

The farmers' institutes recognized the need for providing some instruction in agriculture for the farm boys and girls as well as interesting them in rural life. The farmers' institutes in many States cooperated with the county superintendent of schools in promoting various kinds of production contests, soil tests, and identification of plants, as a means of interesting the young people. The results of this type of work indicated that there was much to be learned in the way of nature study and agriculture outside of the schoolroom--on the farms and in the homes of the boys and girls.

One farmers' institute that attracted a great deal of attention, because of the manner in which interest had been revived in the institute through participation of farm boys, was in Macoupin County, Illinois. In 1900, W. B. Otwell furnished a small package of seed corn to each of 500 boys who were to grow corn and make an exhibit for prizes at the time of the next farmers' institute. No organization or program of instruction was provided in this plan.

In January 1902, A. B. Graham, superintendent of schools in Clark County, Ohio, organized a boys' and girls' agricultural club in Springfield Township. The program of this club consisted of growing corn, planting a garden, testing soils, club meetings, visits to club members' plots, and an exhibit. In February 1902, Superintendent O. J. Kern,

who was promoting the improvement of rural schools in Winnebago County, Illinois, organized a farmer boys' experiment club in cooperation with the agricultural college. About 1903, the Texas Farmers' Congress sponsored the Farmer Boys' and Girls' League. In Iowa, a boys' and girls' agricultural club was organized in March 1904 by County Superintendent of Schools Cap E. Miller at Sigourney, Keokuk County.

The work with the farm boys in Illinois reached a spectacular climax at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, St. Louis, Mo., in 1904, when 8,000 Illinois farm boys contributed to the corn exhibit in the Palace of Agriculture. About this time the Ohio State Federation of Rural Schools' Agricultural Clubs was organized, and the members received printed directions and report sheets issued by the Agricultural Students' Union of the State college of agriculture.

Further development of a program for rural boys and girls was made in 1905 by O. H. Benson, county superintendent of schools in Wright County, Iowa.

In the early development of the control of the boll weevil in the South, Dr. Seaman A. Knapp, of the United States Department of Agriculture, encouraged the formation of boys' corn clubs. The first of these boys' and girls' demonstration clubs was organized in 1907, in Holmes County, Miss., by W. H. Smith, a school superintendent. He was later employed to further boys' and girls' club work by the United States Department of Agriculture. In March 1909, O. B. Martin, former State superintendent of schools in South Carolina, was employed by Dr. Seaman Knapp to give attention to the development of home demonstration and boys' and girls' clubs in Southern States.

The girls' canning clubs originated in Aiken County, So. Carolina, early in 1910. Miss Marie Cromer, teacher of a rural school, went in December 1909 as a representative of Aiken County to the annual session of the school improvement association. At this meeting, she made contact with a representative of the United States Department of Agriculture and discussed club work as it might relate to the development of a program suited to girls.

From these illustrations, it can be seen that the beginnings of 4-H Club work were not the ideas of any one individual but grew out of situations existing throughout the country, and many persons played an important part in the early development. The fundamental principle behind this activity was to extend agricultural education to young people in the rural areas through the organization of boys and girls into clubs. A statement of early objectives of boys' and girls' club work coincides closely with the present objectives of 4-H Club work. The terminology and methods used today are only in line with the development of educational procedure and technique.

The State agricultural colleges and the United States Department of Agriculture were in intimate contact with the development of this new type of education. The land-grant colleges recommended the organization

of a distinct administrative division in each of the colleges for directing the many agricultural extension activities that were developing. By 1912 virtually all of the agricultural colleges in the Southern States had signed cooperative agreements with the U. S. Department of Agriculture and had organized extension departments. Congress made some appropriation for this work in 1913. By 1913, a system of demonstration work had been established in almost all of the States. Further congressional action, resulting in the passage of the Smith-Lever Act in 1914, provided sufficient funds for the establishment of a single extension system in which the State agricultural colleges and the United States Department of Agriculture cooperated. The 4-H Clubs then became a definite part of the general agricultural extension program.

The way of a new type of education was not easy. Among the major difficulties confronted in the early organization of boys' and girls' club work was the lack of trained leadership to handle local club organization and program. The idea that information developed in a college or experiment station was not applicable to local situations was prevalent. Then, too, agricultural science had not yet established itself in the minds of a great many people. Many also thought that agricultural skill and technique could be acquired by only practical farmers. The overcrowded curriculum of the school made it difficult to have another program injected into it. This led to the organization of the clubs outside of the school with farm men and women acting as volunteer leaders of clubs. These volunteer leaders were furnished materials and given training by county extension agents. Once the extension work was established, farm people saw the practical benefits of this type of work, so public support and enthusiasm grew throughout the Nation.

Appropriations of State agricultural colleges were used to develop the early extension work within the State. Congressional appropriations began in 1912. The Smith-Lever Act of 1914 established the Cooperative Extension Service. This was further supplemented in 1928 by the Capper-Ketcham Act, in 1935 by the Bankhead-Jones Act, and in 1945 by the Bankhead-Flannagan Act. State and county appropriating bodies provide funds, also. All these acts have to do with agricultural extension work of which 4-H Club work is a part. The funds are administered cooperatively by the United States Department of Agriculture and the State agricultural colleges. In the employment of county extension agents, who have charge of 4-H Club work within the county, county governing boards make appropriations to supplement State and Federal appropriations.

The national headquarters for 4-H Club work are in the United States Department of Agriculture. The State headquarters are at the State agricultural colleges. Each State has a State club leader and assistants working under the direction of a director of extension. The work in the counties is directed and supervised by county extension agents. Volunteer local leaders trained by the extension service direct and supervise the program of the local clubs.

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